

# **RETHINKING DEBATABLE MOMENTS IN THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT**

LEARNING FOR THE PRESENT MOMENT

*First Edition*

Edited by

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and Terry Wykowski



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I found Professor Hodges' concept of debatable moments in his class, *The Anthropology of the Civil Rights Movement*, to be a great tool for fighting ignorance and learning about the complexities of our multicultural ethnocentric situation and the ongoing injustice in all its forms: social policies, economics, education, politics and government. Through readings, analyses and reports of student participation, *Rethinking Debatable Moments in the Civil Rights Movement: Learning for the Present Moment* lays the groundwork to learn now through the avoidance of a simplistic "sound bite" strategy to a more in-depth study and appreciation of the Civil Rights Movement as it relates to the very difficult decisions that my fellow leaders and I had to make.

—Ambassador Andrew Young  
*Chairman, Andrew J. Young Foundation*

*Rethinking Debatable Moments in the Civil Rights Movement* forces readers to ask important and challenging questions about race and the origins of racism in the United States. As a capital defense attorney, I am constantly confronting the legacy of racial and economic injustice. I firmly believe that anyone who works in the pursuit of racial justice needs to do the vital work of re-examining the civil rights era to understand where we are today.

—Estelle Hebron-Jones, Esq.  
*Staff Attorney, Texas Defender Service*

I applaud Professor Hodges for creating true discussions and debates about racism in his class and expanding this into the present moment through his, Douglas' and Wykowski's book *Rethinking Debatable Moments in the Civil Rights Movement*. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the other courageous leaders in this Godly mission had no prior experience in a movement of this magnitude but were led by a deep feeling about freedom and what it would take to obtain it from a people who were lost in the unjust human treatment of their neighbors. This Movement was born out of the evolving need for understanding true human unity, and dignified overall respect for all. Through this book and the critical role of teachers, schools, churches, other institutions and communities can now benefit from this way of learning and create their own debates and discussions to bring about healing and love especially in times like this all over the world which I experienced in over 22 countries!"

—Rev. Dr. Elbert Ransom, Jr.  
*Professor, Virginia Theological Seminary*

As a leader all my life and professionally in both the private and public sector, I value *Rethinking Debatable Moments in the Civil Rights Movement: Learning for the Present Moment* for both its concept in the classroom and its outcome as a learning process for teaching students how to look at many sides of an issue through critical thinking for life time learning. Using the Civil Rights Movement as the subject of debating the actions of its courageous leaders utilizing readings in this anthology prepares students and readers to fully understand the complexity of choice in this Movement. The reviews of these debatable moments and the questions for consideration for the present moment create a further learning experience for issues of racism and injustice so prevalent today.

—Omar Reid

*Senior Vice President, Human Resources, Harris Health System*

As a survivor and now thriving refugee from the Democratic Republic of the Congo I was intrigued by the concept of debatable moments in the book, *Rethinking Debatable Moments in the Civil Rights Movement: Learning for the Present Moment*. I would love to be in Professor Hodges' class because as an international business student my strength is to analyze and process issues. This book gave me limitless opportunities to do so and marvel at the courage and be motivated by these great leaders of the Civil Rights Movement to create present moments of justice in my work and life. The book gives me ideas to look back at the strategies that were implemented during the Civil Rights Movement that made significant changes in the United States. It changes my view of history because I was taught history with the general overview of what was reported. I never really got the opportunity to critically think, break down and study the things that took place to make the Civil Rights Movement happen. I'm extremely excited that I got to learn and to expand my knowledge of the Civil Rights Movement through rethinking these debatable moments!

—Zizi Kanyabire

*Junior at University of Houston-Downtown*

*Rethinking Debatable Moments in the Civil Rights Movement: Learning for the Present Moment* illuminates issues that continue to this day. I grew up through this era and through this book and the readings and analysis, I have a much better understanding of what the courageous leaders faced over a half a Century ago. This book has challenged my thinking as injustice and racism continue throughout the world. It is not only a good reference book but a prompting to see "the news" and the complex issues with which we all need to grapple in a new light with the need for creative, innovative action!

—Ray Anthony

*President, Anthony Innovation Group,  
Speaker and author of 8 business books*

*This book is dedicated to all the students past, present, and in the future who will carry the hope embodied in the Civil Rights Movement and its courageous leaders and participants. Our future vision of a just society is entrusted to them!*

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Lucretia Williams-Melendez has contributed immensely to this book, first as a “role model” student in The Anthropology of the Civil Rights Movement class and then as a graduate assistant to Professor David Hodges. She devoted herself in mind, body, and spirit to all the debates, documenting the outcomes from every class in writing and motivating the students through her analysis and feedback of their journal work. She was the “backbone” of the class trip to all of the Civil Rights Movement historical places, making all the reservations, taking care of endless details from its inception to its completion, and handling all this with grace, patience, and good humor. It was also because of her efforts that we have our memories captured in a video created by Crystal Waterton, available on YouTube, entitled “Tracing the Footsteps of the Civil Rights Movement.” We are immensely grateful to Lucretia for the integral part she has played in Professor Hodges’s classes and research and the initial selection of the articles for this book.

Professor Hodges’s mother, Dr. Ruth Hall Hodges, was a major source of encouragement to Terry Wykowski through all of her graduate work and life, as she was to countless of her art students and leaders in the Civil Rights Movement in Atlanta, as were David’s father, Mr. Virgil Hodges; his uncle, Dr. Frederick Hall; his brother, Virgil; and every member of his illustrious family of teachers who started in a one-room schoolhouse in Atlanta. Their spirit and legacy are reflected in all of Professor Hodges’s accomplishments and especially in this book!

Finally, Mieka Portier, Tony Paese, and Casey Hands of Cognella have been enormously helpful in getting this book into print. They are a delight to work with and an encouragement to seeking excellence!

# PROLOGUE

The struggle for justice and freedom for persons of African descent in the new world began in 1502, when the first enslaved Africans were delivered by a Portuguese slave ship to Hispaniola, what is now Haiti and the Dominican Republic. Because the need to justify slavery of Africans preceded slavery in Colonial America, Western Europeans, influenced by biblical and then-current scientific rationalizations, provided the racist ideas that promoted and justified American slavery.

For many of us, the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and '60s defines the struggle of black Americans for their civil rights. However, it is in fact only a *moment* in that struggle, which began with the colonization of North America and the founding of this country, and even though today's world is vastly different for many black Americans, that struggle continues to this day.

It is impossible to have an appreciation for the struggle of African Americans without taking account of the almost 500 years of oppression, abuse, and exploitation instigated and sustained by white European slavers and expressed after the end of slavery and today by the actions of latent racists and white supremacists. The experience of what is now the United States itself is the history of 400 years of enslavement, family separation, rebellion, escapes, fugitive slave laws, ignorance, purposeful lies, discrimination, hypocrisy, and the embedding of all of these in the culture. It is the history of hope brought about by the end of slavery, Emancipation, and Reconstruction in the South. As Reconstruction unraveled, it is also the history of disappointment and disillusionment with the reenslavement of black people through the period of Jim Crow, designed to perpetuate the supply of cheap labor, and with the experience of discrimination and exploitation associated with the Great Migration of black people from the rural South to cities in the North and West early in the 20th century. In his book *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America*, Ibram Kendi argues that, contrary to popular opinion, hate and ignorance have not driven racist ideas in America; rather, racist policies have been the causal agent, and such policies have sprung from economic, cultural, and political self-interest. "Consumers of these racist ideas have been led to believe there is something wrong with black people, and not the policies that have enslaved, oppressed and confined so many Black people" (Kendi 2016).

Many Americans perceive the emergence and recovery of African Americans from centuries of legal enslavement as defined by Emancipation and the Civil Rights Movement of the mid-20th century. The Movement, however, did not arise from nothing. There were many organized and goal-directed efforts toward advocating civil rights in the post-Civil War period. Early during Reconstruction, blacks formed Equal Rights Leagues throughout the South and protested against discrimination. In the period after Reconstruction, blacks established the Colored Farmers' Alliance, which grew to over a million members by the end of the 19th century. Black Women's Clubs addressed educational, health, and poverty issues and were active in making known the practice of lynching in the South. The Black Nationalist Movement came into being after World War I, and the National Negro Congress was formed during the Roosevelt years. Significant labor-oriented actions were undertaken by the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, the first black-led union to be recognized by the American Federation of Labor (AFL). The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) was formed in 1909.

As America prepared to enter World War II, A. Philip Randolph, the founder and then president of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, threatened a march on Washington to protest segregation and discrimination in the military and defense industries. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt was compelled to order an end to discrimination in the government and in the defense companies and to pledge that African Americans would be enlisted in the armed forces according to their percentage in the population. Although all-white draft boards passed over many African Americans and the military remained segregated during the war, over 2.5 million African Americans registered for the draft and volunteered, and over 1.2 million served, many with distinction. But the bigotry and injustice they had known before the war greeted them once more when they returned home. The evil they had helped destroy in Europe was still alive in parts of America. A new sense of entitlement, however, coupled with social and economic conditions, created a powerful motivation to confront racism and bring about change. Civil rights leaders emerged in the postwar period, and early protests over discrimination were fruitful, with President Harry S. Truman ordering the military to desegregate in 1948.

The decades of the 1950s and 1960s were the context in which the Civil Rights Movement played out. Except for the military action in Korea and the anxiety attending the Cold War, the 1950s were peaceful and marked by prosperity and conformity to social norms. The 1960s were more of the same for many Americans, but with the introduction of social turbulence and disillusionment associated with generational conflict over conformity and the pursuit of the war in Vietnam. The general prosperity of this period was not shared by black people, however, most of whom still lived in the Jim Crow South. The migration of many southern blacks to cities in the North continued, but there was limited economic opportunity for them. As a consequence of employment discrimination and the declining economic strength of inner cities, the tax base eroded in many of those cities, with a corresponding lack of services and decaying infrastructure leading to what became known as "white flight" to monolithic, all-white suburbs. The Cold War was reaching a peak of intensity in the 1950s and 1960s, occupying the interests and focus of the national government. Some politicians and some in the media looked for communists

everywhere and were quick to label as “communist” people who disagreed with them about anything, including civil rights. The white middle class was increasing and becoming more affluent, and it was a period of television, advertising, and a growing worship of the “gods of consumption.” Conditions for blacks improved somewhat with the Brown vs. Board of Education decision, but while the decision was accepted in the North and the border states, it was not accepted in the South, leading to more conflict. Powerful and segregationist Southern Democrats were a political problem for the Democratic administrations of Kennedy and Johnson and helped to enfeeble their support for the aims and tactics of the Civil Rights Movement. The Vietnam war became a highly divisive adventure in Southeast Asia, draining resources and national attention, dividing the country, and worsening social conditions and the generational divide.

In a sense, the movement to achieve basic freedoms and civil rights for black citizens was many decades long, but the Movement that is the focus of this book spanned only the years 1954 to 1968 and is popularly known as the Civil Rights Movement. Although Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., is widely seen as the leader of the Movement, it was diverse in its leadership, aims, and tactics. It was, in fact, a web of hundreds of dispersed actions and efforts throughout the South and the nation focused on local change in some cases and action by the federal executive, legislature, and judiciary powers in others. The organizations behind most of the actions during this period were the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). The common thread among the various organizations and the efforts undertaken by them was nonviolence, which was seen to be an effective instrument for an abused and exploited people perpetually in the minority. Most of the leaders of these organizations were connected in some way with the Black Church, which played a major role in how the Movement transitioned from earlier styles and modes of activism. It is a poignant irony that the language and interpretation of Christianity provided the justification for slavery in the minds of many white people, while a different interpretation embodied in the Black Church offered hope for an oppressed people who had nowhere to turn but to God.

As the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s was a *moment* in the overall struggle of African Americans, there are *moments* in the Civil Rights Movement itself that illuminate the issues, tensions, and dynamics in the Movement. These are the Debatable Moments that form the organizing concept and content of this book. This concept is a construct introduced in *The Anthropology of the Civil Rights Movement*, a class at Hunter College of the City University of New York, to stimulate and enliven a critical study of the Movement, to trigger thinking about actual and possible consequences then and now, to seek answers or at least refine the questions, and to catalyze the development of modes or levels of analysis that may inform direction in the present *moment*. There are five Debatable Moments, but as the inquiry and commentary in the chapters and epilogue will show, there is an underlying seamlessness in their reality. The Debatable Moments are 1) Should the NAACP have pursued the case of Claudette Colvin in combating bus segregation in Montgomery? 2) Should Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., have joined

the Freedom Riders when invited to do so in 1961? 3) Should children have been allowed to participate in the Birmingham Campaign protests in 1963? 4) Should SNCC's John Lewis have agreed to amend his speech in the 1963 March on Washington? and 5) Should Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., have turned the marchers around at the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma after Bloody Sunday? The collection of readings is organized and introduced by the Debatable Moments in chapters 1 through 5. The introduction to each chapter will explore the context, the key players, the issues, the nature of the crisis, and the consequences and implications of how the Debatable Moment played out. Finally, in the epilogue, we will explore how understanding these moments may point to more generalized *moments* that shaped how the Movement emerged and how it continues to have an effect on the state of race in America.

Regarding the current racial reality in America, for all that has been achieved since the mid-20th century, racism and discrimination and racial disparity in social and economic status continue to exist and produce consequences for people of color. In 2004, then Senator Barack Obama declared in his speech to the Democratic National Convention, "There is not a black America, there is not a white America, there is not a Latino America, there is not an Asian America, there is one United States of America." With that thought and the election of President Barack Obama four years later, many in the country believed the country had finally arrived at a post-racial America, an America that would finally deliver on all the promises of the last 150 years. The unfortunate truth is that ten years after President Obama assumed office, a smoldering and latent racism, given new life by the eight-year experience of the first black president, seems to have re-introduced the ugly political environment we thought we had left behind, an environment that scapegoats the "other," sets some white people against people of color, and is moving segments of the society in the direction of more division and polarization. Below is a brief narrative snapshot of some aspects of the reality of racial disparity in 2020:

Despite gains in income and wealth, the median net worth of whites remains nearly 10 times that of blacks, and this gap is growing. Nearly 1 in 5 black families have zero or negative net worth (Jan 2017). Wealth and financial stability are linked to home ownership, and the racial gap in home ownership between blacks and whites is greater now than it was during the Jim Crow period. A study from the Economic Policy Institute reports that average wages for black workers were almost 27 percent lower than those for white workers, a difference that is larger than it has been in almost 40 years. The reason for this disparity is "not education, not work experience, not whether you live on a farm or in a downtown apartment complex. It's discrimination and it's borne out in the data" (Demby 2016).

"Being a person of color in America is bad for your health." "In the U.S., health disparities between blacks and whites run deep. For example, blacks have higher rates of diabetes, hypertension, and heart disease than other groups,

and black children have a 500% higher death rate from asthma compared with white children” (Williams, Sprague, and Lavizzo-Mourey 2016). Heart disease and cancer are the leading causes of death across race, ethnicity, and gender. African Americans were 30 percent more likely than whites to die prematurely from heart disease in 2010, and African American men are twice as likely as whites to die prematurely from stroke. The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reports that nearly 44 percent of African American men and 48 percent of African American women have some form of cardiovascular disease (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine 2017). According to the CDC, black women are four times more likely to die from complications related to pregnancy and childbirth than are white women (Newman 2016).

The relationship of discrimination, unemployment and under-employment and poverty with incarceration and its consequences is well understood and reflected in the following quotes from the Sentencing Project. “African Americans are more likely than white Americans to be arrested; once arrested, they are more likely to be convicted; and once convicted they are more likely to experience lengthy prison sentences. African American adults are 5.9 times as likely to be incarcerated than whites. ... Black people are much more likely to be arrested for drugs, even though they’re not more likely to use or sell them.” “As of 2001, one of every three black boys born in that year could expect to go to prison in his lifetime. ... What might appear at first to be a linkage between race and crime is in large part a function of urban poverty, which is far more common for African Americans than for other racial groups.” “In 1968, the Kerner Commission called on the country to make ‘massive and sustained’ investments in jobs and education to reverse the ‘segregation and poverty that have created in the racial ghetto a destructive environment totally unknown to most white Americans.’ Fifty years later, the Commission’s lone surviving member concluded that, ‘in many ways, things have gotten no better—or have gotten worse’” (The Sentencing Project 2018).

The reporting in the media of shootings of black men by police leaves us stunned by what would appear to be unwarranted use of deadly force against unarmed men, who are often subdued or moving away from officers. Even when it seems clear that police behavior in the case of some individuals is not justified, police departments are not inclined to discipline these officers, and courts are not prepared to convict them. But while these are the cases that make the news, what is the reality in a broader sense? An

analysis of FBI data by the news organization VOX found that US police kill black people at a disproportionate rate. “Black people accounted for 31 percent of police killing victims in 2012 even though they made up just 14 percent of the US population.” Even this data is incomplete because it is based on voluntary police reporting. The disparities appear to be even starker for unarmed suspects. Racial minorities made up about 37 percent of the general US population but accounted for more than 62 percent of unarmed people killed by police (Lopez 2018). There is an argument that some of these disparities are the result of poverty, unemployment, and underemployment, leading to more crime in black communities and, therefore, a greater police presence in these communities. While there is some validity to this argument, it does not fully explain the disparity, and, more significantly, it dramatically points to the socioeconomic disparity that fuels a seemingly unshakable multigenerational pattern of discrimination and underachievement.

Given the usefulness of the Debatable Moments as a classroom construct to enhance learning and engagement, this book aims to broaden the exposure to this process and concept through the source material and the levels of analysis and interpretation offered. As we relive these moments or encounter them for the first time, readers are challenged to consider a number of questions: What have we learned from the Movement? Why did it emerge the way it did? Why did it stress civil and political rights above material or economic rights? Why were so many men rather than women at the forefront, and why were they wearing suits rather than overalls? Could the Movement have emerged and developed in ways that would have brought about different results, then and now? And, perhaps most importantly, how does this material inform our conceptions of the state of racial circumstances in the United States in 2020 and the pursuit of a positive way forward?

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## CHAPTER 1

# Should the NAACP Have Pursued the Case of Claudette Colvin in Combating Bus Segregation in Montgomery?

## Introduction

### Context

Montgomery, Alabama, has been called the cradle of the Confederacy, and in the mid-1950s, it was a cauldron of settled white political and economic power, entrenched segregation, and the budding aspirations of African Americans. Montgomery had been the capital of Alabama since 1847. It was the site of the meeting where the decision was made to secede from the Union in 1861 and was the Confederate capital before it moved to Richmond. The city had served as a site of active markets in cotton and slaves before the Civil War. The period of Reconstruction after the war was chaotic in Montgomery, as it was throughout the South, and saw continued violent opposition to Reconstruction itself and to the newly granted freedoms of black people. As federal laws provided civil rights protections for freed slaves, expressions of white supremacy evolved during Reconstruction and reemerged at the end of this period.

Late in the period of Reconstruction, segregationists were able to regain power in southern state legislatures, and those bodies passed racial segregation and disenfranchisement laws. These statutes became known as Jim Crow laws and served to essentially restore African Americans to a state of nonparticipation in politics with little or no access to education and limited freedoms and opportunity. Jim Crow laws were generally in effect from the last years of the 19th century until the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts of 1964 and 1965, but it required many more years of effort to mitigate their institutional effects, a process that continues to this day.

Rural blacks and whites migrated to Montgomery during the 19th and 20th centuries looking for a better life. The population of Montgomery in 1955 was about 120,000 people, of whom roughly 63 percent were white and 37 percent were black (Thornton 2014). Most black men in Montgomery in the 1950s worked as laborers or in service jobs. Most black women worked as domestic servants in white households. Montgomery introduced street cars in 1886 and segregated racial seating in the early 1900s. There had been a two-year streetcar boycott in Montgomery beginning in 1900. Segregation of public transportation continued, however, and after 1936, city buses replaced streetcars. After the end of World War II, protests against discrimination and segregation in public transportation increased significantly, sometimes and in some places bringing about an end to segregation. There had been a boycott of buses in Baton Rouge in 1953 that resulted in partial desegregation of city buses. In 1955, African Americans constituted the majority of riders of Montgomery's city buses and were fully subject to Jim Crow laws. A yearlong boycott of Montgomery's segregated buses began on the morning of December 5, 1955.

## The People

In popular memory, Rosa Parks was the catalyst of the Montgomery Bus Boycott; she became a civil rights icon. She was arrested early on Thursday evening, December 1, 1955, for refusing to give up her seat in the unreserved midsection of a city bus to a white man. Rosa Parks was a seamstress and the wife of Raymond A. Parks. She was also the secretary for the Montgomery branch of the NAACP and had completed a course in race relations at the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee, where nonviolent civil disobedience was discussed as a tactic. Edgar D. Nixon was a Pullman car porter, president of the local chapter of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, and president of the Montgomery branch of the NAACP. After Rosa Parks's arrest, Nixon organized a meeting of local pastors at Martin Luther King, Jr.'s, Dexter Avenue Baptist Church. The 26-year-old Dr. King was elected president of the Montgomery Improvement Association, which was formed to direct the boycott. While Dr. King would rise to singular national prominence in the Civil Rights Movement, he did not make the Movement; as civil rights leader Ella Baker pointed out later, "the Movement made Martin." This was especially true in Montgomery in 1955 and 1956 (Burns 1997). Reverend Ralph Abernathy was pastor of the First Baptist Church in Montgomery and a collaborator with Dr. King in organizing the boycott. He became a national leader in the Movement, and as a result of the boycott, his home was bombed in 1957, as was Dr. King's in 1956. Bayard Rustin was a colorful and influential pacifist and activist who, coming from the civil disobedience world outside Alabama, argued for a more aggressive yet nonviolent approach. After running afoul of the authorities, Rustin was smuggled out of Montgomery in the trunk of a car. After Rustin left the scene of the boycott, he brought in his Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR) colleague Glenn Smiley. Smiley, in concert with Rustin, helped convince Dr. King and others that nonviolent direct action was the most effective way forward (Branch 1988).

In important ways, women were the driving force and the "unsung heroes" in the Montgomery boycott. Many women had similar experiences to Rosa Parks in the 1930s, '40s, and '50s. One of these was Claudette Colvin, who was arrested a few months earlier, in March 1955. She was a

15-year-old high school junior. Upon exclaiming that she was just as good as any white person and that she was not going to move, she was arrested and convicted of violating the segregation law, disorderly conduct, and resisting arrest and placed on indefinite probation. After this verdict “blacks were as near a breaking point as they had ever been. Resentment, rebellion and unrest were evident in all Negro circles” (Robinson and Garrow 1987). A year before the Rosa Parks incident, Professor Jo Ann Robinson had formed the idea of a bus boycott and petitioned the mayor to improve service for blacks or face the possibility of an organized boycott (Robinson and Garrow 1987). Jo Ann Robinson held a faculty position at Alabama State College in Montgomery. She became president of the Women’s Political Council in 1950, succeeding Mary Fair Burks and shifting the group’s focus to abuses in public transportation. Professor Robinson mimeographed thousands of flyers urging blacks to observe the boycott and helped to organize carpools to help blacks get to and from work.

Not initially known to anyone other than her family, Mary Louise Smith was arrested earlier in 1955 for refusing to give up her seat on a segregated bus. Mother Pollard, then 72 years old, after weeks of walking rather than riding a bus during the boycott, was quoted as having said, “my feet is tired, but my soul is rested” (King 1963). After being fired from her job for involvement in the boycott, Georgia Gilmore began producing meals to sell to boycotters and at rallies through what she called the Club from Nowhere. The proceeds of these sales were donated to the Montgomery Improvement Association to help sustain the boycott and provide a model for grassroots community support. Virginia Foster Durr was a white civil rights activist. She was a close friend of both Rosa Parks and Eleanor Roosevelt. She had arranged for the scholarship for Rosa Parks to attend the Highlander School and, with her husband, Clifford, and E. D. Nixon, bailed Rosa Parks out of jail after she was arrested. During the boycott, Virginia Foster Durr spent her time making coffee and bacon and eggs for the boycotters.

## The Crisis

The bus boycott in Montgomery grew out of a long history of activism by people from different backgrounds and economic circumstances. Throughout his tenure as state president of the NAACP, E. D. Nixon heard many complaints about the blatant racism experienced on Montgomery city buses. This occurred in spite of the fact that 75 percent of the system’s riders were black passengers and most of these were women. The Jim Crow–inspired ordinance in Montgomery was more insidious than the fact that blacks had to sit behind a line in the back of the bus. The driver could demand use of some of the seats allocated to blacks if there were white people on the bus without a seat, causing the black people to have to stand. Also, no row of seats demanded by the driver for one or more white passengers could have a black person in any seat on that row, meaning they all had to move. The entire African American community in Montgomery was incensed over the Claudette Colvin affair. During this period, Nixon and the local branch of the NAACP had been on the lookout for a perfect situation that could become a test case against the Montgomery ordinance that required separation of riders by race. “That law required black riders to follow the instructions of the driver: if he told them to move, they were required by law

to move and to make room for white riders” (Williams and Greenhaw 2006). After Rosa Parks’s arrest, Nixon proposed his case to her: “Mrs. Parks,” he said, “with your permission we can break down segregation on the bus with your case.” After consulting with her husband and mother, Parks decided to let Nixon make her case into a cause (Williams 1988). The time had come!

## The Issues

Who would be the face of the boycott? Did the boycott need a face? The champions and organizers of the boycott seemed to believe that it did, and Rosa Parks emerged as that face. She had a quiet dignity; she had no skeletons in her closet and was better known in the community than any of the other arrested women. She was a wife and a devoted church member; she was imminently presentable and respectable, in contrast to others. The concept, at least, of “oneness” as understood in social psychology appears to have been in the minds of Dr. King, E. D. Nixon, Reverend Abernathy, Jo Ann Robinson, and others. *Oneness* in this context refers to “the recognizing of one exceptional individual and the ignoring of others, many of whom may have performed as well as or better than the one acclaimed. ... The concept of oneness describes a non-universal but powerful tendency for individuals and groups to simplify complex comparisons by choosing one prominent performer or entity” (Schwartz 2009). Rosa Parks’s refusal to give up her seat and her subsequent arrest were not planned, but the leaders in the black community were ready to take advantage of the right person being thrust into the right situation at the right time to spark the boycott. There was some tension among the boycott leaders regarding the idea of direct action in the form of a boycott versus litigation as an overall strategy. But in fact, both tracks were pursued at the same time. While the boycott itself became the public point of focus in the effort, legal redress through the courts was vigorously pursued.

## Consequences and Implications

In important ways, the Montgomery bus boycott launched the modern Civil Rights Movement. It demonstrated the power of community and solidarity and showed how pursuing the dual track of direct action and litigation are mutually reinforcing. The city of Montgomery passed an ordinance ending segregation on public buses, allowing black bus passengers to sit anywhere they chose, and the boycott ended on December 20, 1956. On June 4, 1956, the Federal District Court ruled that racial segregation laws for buses in Alabama were unconstitutional. Alabama appealed this decision, and on November 13, 1956, the United States Supreme Court upheld the District Court’s ruling. Claudette Colvin, while not becoming the face of the boycott, was among the plaintiffs in the legal action. Rosa Parks had little to do with the boycott once it had begun. She became a national celebrity, however, as the perceived “mother of the Civil Rights Movement,” which lasted throughout her life. When she died in 2005 in Detroit, her remains were placed in state in the US Capitol’s rotunda, an honor previously reserved for presidents, statesmen, and military leaders. Martin Luther King, Jr., also gained national attention and emerged as the leader of the Civil Rights Movement. The Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) was formed early in the boycott, and Dr. King was elected its president.

The classroom debate centered on the Debatable Moment in question: Should the case of Claudette Colvin have become the face of combating bus segregation in Montgomery? The essential point of contention in this debate could be described as an expression of idealism versus pragmatism coming into focus around two different perspectives of “respectability.” The pro-Colvin supporters argued that she should have been supported as a matter of principle; to not do so is an act of appeasing the oppressors. The pro-Parks contingent pointed out that Colvin had been supported as a plaintiff in the legal action. They argued further that not only are reason and principle needed in seeking solutions to discrimination, but addressing the emotions of those who will bring about change must also be taken into account. From an idealistic perspective, supporting Claudette Colvin or others could have been consistent with principle and could challenge the logic that the person representing the boycott had to be morally superior to her oppressors. The Movement leaders’ decision to align their actions with the Rosa Parks incident, however, was a pragmatic one that had the potential to engage white people around the country and achieve a better outcome.

In terms of achieving their aims, there is no doubt that the Montgomery bus boycott and the associated legal action were successful. The Debatable Moments project, however, invites us to consider the efficacy of alternative courses of action. Regarding these, some questions remain and, with others, will reappear in subsequent chapters. Are pragmatism and idealism always in conflict? Is respectability politics always an accommodation to oppression? The question regarding respectability could be seen as a sort of debatable moment itself that, unlike the Debatable Moments that form the structure of this book, was never really debated. In addition to respectability, there were other such possibly-debatable-yet-undebated moments that shaped the movement. Economics was not a fundamental aspect of the bus boycott in Montgomery, nor of the Civil Rights Movement that emerged. Economics, however, plays an undisputed role in creating and sustaining injustice broadly and racial injustice specifically. It has been argued that petitioning the city for an African American–owned bus franchise existed as another strategy in Montgomery. The implementation of such a strategy “would have forced desegregation of city buses while economically and politically empowering the African American community.” Strategies of mass protest “premised upon the philosophy of social integration without concomitant economic parity, unwittingly curtailed African American community development towards full economic empowerment” (Kinshasa 2006). What would have been the effect of an economic focus in the Movement in today’s world on cycles of poverty, unemployment, and underemployment? As we will see in this chapter and in subsequent ones, as well, women were central to the Civil Rights Movement but, with a few exceptions, were largely invisible in leadership and in the public face of the Movement. Would women in strong and even dominant leadership roles have changed the outcomes then and now? Finally, considering how the leadership of the boycott and the Movement migrated to Church-affiliated people, and with no suggestion that an alternative approach might have been appropriate, it is interesting to think about the implications of interpretation. The Movement was clearly shaped by the Social Gospel, in contrast to a more fundamentalist interpretation of Christian beliefs and ethics. It seems that where

Fundamentalism would have been oriented to sustaining the status quo and hoping for God's intervention to alleviate suffering, the adherents of Social Gospel ideals looked to actively apply Christian ethics to social problems, especially to issues of social justice.

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## Discussion Questions

- 1 Why did the NAACP not pursue the case of Claudette Colvin?
- 2 What were the factual differences between the cases of Claudette Colvin and Rosa Parks?
- 3 What might have been the difference in results had the case of Claudette Colvin been pursued instead of Rosa Parks?